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EXTRACTS

FROM THE WRITINGS

OF

DIVERS EMINENT AUTHORS,

OF

DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS;

AND AT

VARIOUS PERIODS OF TIME.

Representing the Evils and pernicious Effects of

STAGE PLAYS,

And other vain Amusements.

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EXTRACTS, &c.

FROM THE PRINCE OF CONTI.

“THERE will be many persons ready to assert, that they have never received any ill impression from *Comedy*; but I maintain, either that they are very few in number, or that they are not sincere, or that they have not reflected enough on themselves to perceive it, or else, that the only reason why *Comedy* has not corrupted their manners, is, because it found them already corrupted, and that they had left it nothing to do in this matter.”

“It is impossible to consider the business of a *Player*, and to compare it with the *Christian Profession*, without being sensible that there is nothing more unworthy of a Child of GOD, and of a member of JESUS CHRIST, than this employment. I do not speak of the gross irregularities only,

and the dissolute manner in which the women appear on the Stage, because those who justify *Plays*, always separate that sort of disorders from them in their imagination, though they are never separated in *effect*. I speak only of that which is absolutely inseparable from them. 'Tis an employment, the end of which is, the diversion of others; where men and women appear on a Theatre, to represent the passions of *Hatred, Anger, Ambition, Révenge*, and chiefly that of *Love*. They must express them as lively and as naturally as is possible for them; and they cannot do so, if they do not in some manner excite them in themselves, and if their souls do not take all the changes which we see in their faces. Those, then, who represent a passion, must be in some measure touched with it whilst they represent it; and it is not to be imagined, that they can presently efface from their minds that impression which they have voluntarily excited in it, and that it does not leave a great disposition to the same passion which they have been so willingly sensible of. Thus, *Plays* are, even in their nature, a school and an exercise of vice, since it is an art, in which one must necessarily excite in himself vicious passions. And if we consider that the whole life of *Players* is employed in this exercise, that they pass it entirely
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either in learning by themselves, or rehearsing among one another, or in representing to spectators the image of some vice; and that they have scarce any thing in their minds but these follies; we shall easily see, that it is impossible to join this employment with the Purity of our Religion. And thus it must be owned, that it is a prophane employment, and unworthy of a *Christian*; and that by consequence, it is not allowable for others to contribute to maintain them in a profession contrary to *Christianity*, or to authorize it by their presence."

" Those deceive themselves extremely, who think, that *Plays* make no ill impression on them, because they do not find them excite any formed evil desire.—There are many degrees before one comes to an entire corruption of mind, and it is always extremely hurtful to the soul to destroy the ramparts which secured it from temptation."

" One does not begin to fall when the fall becomes sensible; the fallings of the soul are slow, they have progressions and preparations; and it often happens, that one is overcome by a temptation only by our having weakened ourselves, in occasions which seemed of no importance; it being
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certain, that he who despises *little things*, shall fall by *little and little*."

"It must not be imagined, that these wicked maxims of which *Plays* are full, are not hurtful, because people do not go thither to form their sentiments, but to divert themselves; for they do not fail of making impressions notwithstanding, without being perceived; and a gentleman will more sensibly resent an affront, and be the more easily transported to avenge it in the criminal manner which is common in France, when he has heard such sort of verses recited; the reason of which is, that our passions are excited by the objects, and the false opinions with which the mind is prepossessed. The opinion that the chimera of Honour is so great a good, that it must be preserved, even at the expence of life, is what produces the brutal rage of the gentlemen of France. If those who fight a duel were never spoken of but as *Fools* and *Madmen*, as indeed they are; if that Phantom of Honour, which is their Idol, was never represented but as a chimera and folly; if care was taken never to form any image of Revenge, but as of a mean and cowardly action; the resentment which men feel upon an affront, would be infinitely weaker; but that which exasperates and renders it the more lively, is the false

false impressiion, that there is cowardice in bearing an affront. Now, it cannot be denied, that *Plays*, which are full of these evil maxims, do greatly contribute to fortify that impressiion, because the mind being by them transported, and entirely out of itself, instead of correcting those sentiments, abandons itself to them without resistance, and delights to feel the motions they inspire, which dispose it to produce the like upon occasion."

" *Plays* and *Romances* not only indispose the soul for all acts of Religion and Piety ; but they give it a disgust, in some measure, of all serious and ordinary actions. As nothing is represented in them but gallantries, or extraordinary adventures, and that the discourses are far distant from such as are used in serious affairs, one insensibly takes from them a romantic disposition of mind, the head is filled with Heroes and Heroines, and women seeing the adorations which in them are given to their sex (of which they find the image and practice in companies of diversion, where young men talk to them what they have learned in *Romances*, treating them as Nymphs and Goddesses) imprint that sort of life so much in their fancy, that the little affairs of their Family and Housewifery, become insupportable to them ;
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and when they return to their houses, with minds thus evaporated and filled with these follies, they find every thing there disagreeable, and especially their *Husbands*, who, being taken up with their affairs, are not always in a humour of paying them those *ridiculous complaisances* which are given to women in *Plays*, in *Romances*, and in the *romantic Life*."

"The need which men have of diversion, is not by far so great as is thought, and it consists more in imagination, or in custom, than in real necessity. Those who are employed in bodily labour, have only need of a bare cessation from it. Those who are employed in affairs toilsome to the mind, and but little laborious to the body, have need to recollect themselves from that disposition which that sort of employments naturally causes, and not to dissipate themselves yet more, by diversions which extremely engage the mind. 'Tis a jest to fancy that one has need to pass three hours in filling the mind with follies at a play. Those who find in themselves this need, ought to look on it, not as a *natural weakness*, but as a *vice of custom*, which they must cure by *serious employments*."

"If the soul abandons itself to these false pleasures,
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it immediately loses the relish of *spiritual ones*, and finds nothing but disgust for the *Word of GOD*. These are those *four Grapes*, of which the Prophet says, *They benumb and set on edge the teeth of those who eat them*---Jer. 30. 31.—That is to say, when one feeds himself with the vain pleasures of the world, the spiritual senses become stupified, and incapable of relishing or understanding the things of GOD. Now, among the pleasures of the world, which extinguish the love of the *Word of GOD*, it may be said, that *Plays* and *Romances* hold the *first rank*; because there is nothing more opposed to *Truth*, and that the *Spirit of GOD*, being a *Spirit of Truth*, can have no part with the *Vanities of the World*.”

“GOD does not impute to us the coldness which proceeds from the withdrawing of *His Light*, or merely from the heaviness of this body; but no doubt he imputes to us that, to which we have contributed by our negligence and our vain diversions. 'Tis *His Will* that we should esteem nothing so much as the *precious gift*, which He has made us of *His Love* and that *we* should be careful to preserve it by giving it nourishment. This command he has made to all Christians in the persons of the Priests

of the Ancient Law, whom He ordains always to maintain the Fire on the Altar, and to take care to put wood upon it every day in the morning. This Altar is *the Heart of Man*, and every Christian is the *Priest*, who ought to be careful to nourish the *Fire of Charity* on the *Altar of his Heart*, by putting wood every day upon it, that is to say, maintaining it by the meditation of Divine Things, and by exercises of Piety. Now if those who go to *Plays* have yet any sense of Piety, they cannot disown that *Plays* deaden, and entirely extinguish Devotion ; so that they should not doubt, GOD judges them extremely guilty, for having made so little account of *His Love*, that instead of nourishing and endeavouring to augment it, they have not feared to extinguish it by their vain diversions ; and that He will impute to them as a great sin, the abatement or the loss of their Love to Him. For if a dissipation of the goods of the world, and of earthly riches, by luxury and gaming, is no little sin, what must be judged of a dissipation of the goods of *Grace*, and of that precious treasure the Scripture speaks of, which we ought to purchase by the loss of all the goods and all the pleasures of this life."

CAVE, in his Account of the PRIMITIVE

TIVE CHRISTIANS, says, "The Christians of those days went not to public feasts, nor frequented the shews that were made for the disport, and the entertainment of the people, and this was so notorious, that the heathens charged it upon them as part of their crime; observe how in Minutius Fœlix, it is drawn up (saith Clemens Alexandrinus) the Romans, says he, govern and enjoy the world, while you in the mean time are careful and mopish, abstaining even from lawful pleasures; you visit not the shews, nor are present at the pomps, nor frequent the public feasts; you abhor the holy games, the sacrificial meats and drinks; crown not your heads with garlands, nor perfume your bodies with sweet odours: a ghastly, fearful and miserable people:" which by the time that Octavius the Christian comes to answer, he grants it all to be true, and tells him, "there was very good reason why they should abstain from their shews, pomps and divertisements, at which they could not be present without great sin and shame, without affronting their modesty, and offering a distate and horror to their minds."

ARCHBISHOP USHER, speaking of
Interludes and Stage Plays, says, "They
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offend against many branches of the 7th commandment together, both in the abuse of apparel, tongue, eyes, countenance, gestures, and all parts almost of the body. For besides the wantonness therein used, both in attire, speech and action; the man putteth on the apparel of the woman (which is forbidden as a thing abominable: *Deut.* 22, 5.) much *filthiness* is presented to the beholders, *and foolish talking and jesting, which are not convenient*: Lastly, *fornication and all uncleanness (which ought not to be once named amongst Christians)* is made a spectacle of joy and laughter. *Eph.* v. 3, 4. Therefore they that go to see such sights, and hear such words, shew their neglect of Christian Duty, and carelessness in sinning, when as they willingly commit themselves into the snare of the Devil. *1 Cor.* xv. 33.

ARCHBISHOP TILLOTSON, mentioning *Plays*, says, “They are intolerable, and not fit to be permitted in a civilized, much less a Christian Nation. They do most notoriously minister to vice and infidelity. By their prophaneness they are apt to instil bad principles into the minds of men, and to lessen that awe and reverence which all men ought to have of GOD and *Religion*; and by their lewdness they teach
vice,

vice, and are apt to infect the minds of men, and dispose them to lewd and dissolute practices."

FROM CHIEF JUSTICE HALE.

"Beware of too much recreation. Some bodily exercise is necessary, for sedentary men especially; but let it not be too frequent nor too long. Gaming, Taverns, and *Plays*, as they are pernicious, and corrupt youth; so if they had no other fault, they are justly to be declined in respect of their excessive expence of time, and habituating men to idleness and vain thoughts, and disturbing passions and symptoms when they are past, as well as while they are used."

The BISHOP of SARUM, who published the Life of Chief Justice Hale, gives the following account of him, viz. "He was an extraordinary proficient at school, and, for some time, at Oxford. But the Stage Players coming thither, he was so corrupted by seeing many Plays, that he almost forsook his studies. By this he not only lost much time, but found that his head came thereby to be filled with such vain images of things, that they were at best unprofitable, if not hurtful to him. And being afterwards sensible of the mischief

chief of this, he resolved upon his coming to London (where he knew the opportunities of such fights would be more frequent and inviting) never to see a Play again *to which he constantly adhered.*"

CLARKE, in his *Essay on Study*, speaking of *Plays* and *Romances*, says, "By what I have seen of them, I believe they are generally very indiscreetly and foolishly written, in a way proper to recommend vanity and wickedness, rather than discredit them; have a strong tendency to corrupt and debauch the mind with silly mischievous notions of love and honour, and other things relating to the conduct of life."

WILLIAM LAW,

A Clergyman of the Church of England.

"You own that God has called you to great purity of conversation; that you are forbid all *foolish discourse*, and *filthy jesting*, as expressly as you are forbid swearing; and that you are told to *let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth*, and yet you go to a house of corrupt communication; you hire persons to entertain you with ribaldry, prophaneness, rant, and impurity

purity of discourse; who are to present you with poisonous sentiments, and lewd imaginations, dressed up in elegant language; and to make wicked, vain, and impure discourse, more lively and delightful, than you could possibly have it in any other ill company. Is not this sinning with a high hand, and grossly offending against the plainest doctrines of scripture."

"As prejudices, the force of education, the authority of numbers, the way of the world, the example of great names, may make people believe; so the same causes may make people act against all sense and reason, and be guilty of practices which are utterly inconsistent with the purity of their religion."

"If impure speeches; if wanton amours; if wild passions, and immoral rant, can give us any delight, is it not past all doubt, that we have something of all these disorders in our nature? and that we nourish and strengthen them by those gratifications?"

"There is no doctrine of our blessed Saviour, that more concerns all Christians, or is more essential to their salvation than this, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Now take the stage in its best state, when some admired tragedy
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is upon it ; are the extravagant passions of distracted lovers, the impure ravings of inflamed heroes, the joys and torments of love, and refined descriptions of lusts ; are the indecent actions, the amorous transports, the wanton address of the actors, which make so great a part of the most sober and modest tragedies ; are these things consistent with the Christian doctrine of purity of heart ?”

“ All people who enter into these houses of entertainment, or contribute the smallest mite towards them, must look upon themselves as having been so far friends to the most powerful instruments of sensuality, and to be guilty of contributing to an open and public exercise of splendid impurity and prophaneness. When we encourage any good design, either with our consent, our money, or presence, we are apt to take a great deal of merit to ourselves ; we presently conclude that we are partakers of all that is good or praise-worthy in it ; of all the benefit that arises from it, because we are contributors towards it. A man does not think that he has no share in some public charity, because he is but one in ten thousand that contributes towards it (or because it would go forward without his contribution) but if it be a religious charity,

rity, and attended with great and happy effects, his conscience tells him, that he is a sharer of all that great good to which he contributed. Now let this teach us how we ought to judge of the guilt of encouraging any thing that is bad, either with our consent, our money, or our presence. We must not consider how much our single part contributes towards it, how much less we contribute than several thousands of other people, *nor that the work would go forward, if we did not at all contribute to it*; but we must look at the whole thing itself, and whatever there is of evil in it, or whatever evil arises from it, we must charge ourselves with a share of the whole guilt of so great an evil."

"People of fashion and quality have great advantage above the vulgar; their condition and education give them a liveliness, and brightness of parts from whence one might justly expect a more exalted virtue. How comes it then, that we see as ill morals, as little religious wisdom, and as great disorders among them as among the most rude, uneducated part of the world? It is because the politeness of their lives, their course of diversions and amusements, and their way of spending their time, as much extinguish the wisdom and light of religion,

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religion, as the grossness and ignorance of the dullest part of the world. Any way of life that darkens our minds, that misemploys our understanding, that fills us with a trifling Spirit, that disorders our passions, that separates us from the Spirit of God, is the same certain road to destruction, whether it arises from stupid sensuality, rude ignorance, or polite pleasures. Had any one therefore, the power of an Apostle, or the tongue of an Angel, it would be well employed in exposing, and dissuading from those ways of life, which wealth, corruption and politeness have brought among us. We indeed only call them diversions; but they do the whole work of idolatry and infidelity, and fill people with so much blindness and hardness of heart, that they neither live by wisdom, nor feel the want of it, but are content to play away their lives, with scarce any attention to the approaching scenes of death, judgment, and eternity."

WILLIAM PENN, in his *No Cross, No Crown*, says, "How many *Plays* did JESUS CHRIST and his *Apostles* recreate themselves at? What *Romances, Comedies*, and the like, did the *Apostles* and *Saints* make, or use, to pass away their time withal? I know, they bid all redeem their time,

to avoid foolish talking, vain jesting, profane babblings, and fabulous stories, as what tend to ungodliness, and rather to watch, to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, to flee foolish and youthful lusts, and to follow *Righteousness, Peace, Goodness, Love, Charity*, and to mind the things that are above, as they would have *Honour, Glory, Immortality, and Eternal Life.*"

POLITICAL.

Sir JOHN HAWKINS, speaking of the pernicious effects of *Plays*, says, "Upon setting up or opening a certain Theatre, its contiguity to the City soon made it a Place of resort, and what was apprehended from the advertisement of the *Plays* to be exhibited in that quarter of the Town, soon followed; the adjacent Houses became *Taverns* in name, but in truth they were houses of lewd Resort, and the former occupiers of them, useful Manufacturers and industrious Artificers were driven to seek elsewhere for a Residence."

"And he further remarks, "that the Merchants of London then a grave sagacious Body of Men, found the Theatre was a temptation to idleness and to pleasure that their Clerks could not resist; they regretted

to see the corruptions of Covent-Garden extended, and the Seats of Industry hold forth allurements to Vice and Debauchery"—And again he observes "That although of *Plays* it is said, that they teach Morality, and of the *Stage*, that it is the mirror of human Life, these assertions are mere declamation, and have no foundation in truth or experience, on the contrary a *Play House*, and the Regions about it, are the very Hot Beds of Vice; how else comes it to pass that no sooner is a *Play House* opened in any part of the kingdom, than it becomes a *Halo* (or Circle) of Brothels.—Of this truth the neighbourhood of the place I am now speaking of has had experience; one Parish alone adjacent thereto, having to my knowledge expended the Sum of 1300l. in prosecutions for the purpose of removing those Inhabitants whom the *Play House* had drawn thither."

MONTAGUE, in his reflections on the rise and fall of the antient republics, observes, on the account given by Plutarch, of the effects of theatrical entertainments above two thousand years ago.

"Could we raise that venerable Sage (*Plutarch*) from the grave to take a short survey of the manners of our own countrymen,

men, would he not find an amazingly exact copy of those of the Athenians? Would he not see the same series of daily and nightly diversions, adapted to the taste of every class of people, from the public breakfastings (that bane of the time and industry of the tradesman) up to our modern orgies, the masquerade &c."

"This strange degeneracy of the Athenian manners, which Plutarch so severely censures, was first introduced by Pericles--he procured a law that every citizen was entitled to a gratuity out of the public money, for not only attending the courts of judicature and the assemblies of the states, but even at the entertainments of the theatre, &c. thus Pericles *bought* the people with their own money; the consequence of this corruption, we may learn from the writings of Demosthenes, was, that in a few years time the Athenians were no more the same people."

"Athens, however, by her fall has left us some instructions. Warned by her fate we may learn, that luxury and a prevailing fondness for public diversions, are the never failing forerunners of universal *Idleness, Effeminacy and Corruption*. Reduced at last to a province of the Romans,

Athens

Athens contributed her taste, for arts and sciences, towards *polishing*; and her passion for theatrical performances, towards corrupting the manners of that people."

"The regular drama (as it is called) was imported with the luxury of Greece, but every species of this kind of entertainment, whether tragedy, comedy, farce or pantomime, was comprehended under the general denomination of Stage-Plays, and the different performers alike ranged under the general Term of Players. The profession itself was scandalous, and if once a Roman citizen appeared upon the stage, he immediately forfeited his right of *voting*, and every other privilege of a free man."

"The generous Spartan, trained up in a state when public virtue still continued to be the object of public applause, could not behold the ridiculous assiduity of the *Choragi*, or magistrates who presided at the public shews, and the immense sums they lavished in the decorations of a new tragedy, without indignation."

FINIS.



